A NEW FAMILY

Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས*

CHARACTERS IN THE STORY

'Dzoms pe, a candidate for the local, next "greatest woman" award
'Phags pa, the local community leader
Bkra lha, a candidate for the next "greatest woman" award
Bkra shis, Chos sgron's husband
Chos sgron, Bkra shis's wife
Lha 'dzoms, 'Phags pa's daughter
Lha mo, Bkra shis' daughter
Lha mo 'tsho, the third greatest woman
Ngag dbang, Lha mo's cousin
Pad kho (1), Lha mo's ex-husband
Pad kho (2), Pad ma's son; Lha mo's lover
Pad ma, the father of Lha mo's lover, Pad kho (2); the uncle of Pad ma (1) (Lha mo's first husband)
Thar ba, Lha mo's second husband
Thub bstan, Zla ba's teacher
Zla ba, Lha mo and Pad ma's son

Lha mo wiped a square transistor radio encased in dark plastic with her black scarf and nestled the radio in the old folded robe she used as a pillow. She clicked the radio on as usual at nine PM, making sure the volume was as low as possible to prevent her father, Bkra shis, from scolding her. Radio sounds disturbed his sleep.

No one asked Lha mo why she listened to the radio every night.

Lha mo's mother, Chos sgron, and Lha mo slept on the left side of the family's one-room house. Bkra shis slept on the right side of the same room. The room had one room crammed with the family's belongings. There was no place for beds, so they slept on the floor.

At three AM, Chos sgron got up in the room's utter darkness to go outside to relieve herself. She was surprised and a little afraid by a red light flashing from Lha mo's pillow. She crept to where Lha mo slept, realized it was the radio light, and switched the radio off. Clad only in a suit of long black underwear and a stained white shirt, she walked outside without her robe. Two minutes later, she entered the room, gently closed the wooden door, walked to the right side of the room, and snuggled into Bkra shis' bed.

The next morning, Chos sgron got up at six and was ready to wake Lha mo but found she was not in the room. Usually, when Chos sgron roused Lha mo, she would yawn, reply "OK," and continue to doze until her father woke her. Chos sgron put on her robe and went outside, where she found Lha mo collecting yak dung in the family's yak enclosure. Chos sgron slung a yak dung basket on her back and joined Lha mo. While Lha mo wore tattered gloves, Chos sgron picked up dung chunks with her bare hands.

Meanwhile, Bkra shis thrust a small bunch of shrub branches in the metal stove that sat in the center of the room. He then added dried yak dung and lit the branches with a match. Some minutes later, water began boiling in a soot-blackened kettle above the fire, which also heated a pot of leftover beef noodles on the stove.

When the noodles bubbled, Bkra shis called Chos sgron and Lha mo, who stopped adding frozen and fresh yak dung to the yak enclosure wall. They placed their baskets near the enclosure entrance and helped each other brush dust from their robes.

Bkra shis poured lukewarm water in a red plastic basin where Chos sgron and Lha mo washed their hands. Lha mo unwrapped her black scarf, looked into a mirror on the wall near the room door. She wiped the dust from her nose, squeezing it for a while, upset that her nose was more prominent

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than she thought it should be. She then sat next to her mother on the left side of the room, ready for breakfast.

After breakfast, Lha mo washed the dishes in a basin and swept the room. She picked up a twenty-five-liter plastic water container and headed to the river that ran thirty meters from the house. She filled the container using a plastic scoop. Placing the container on a boulder, she steadied it with her left hand, crouched down, positioned it against her back, pulled a red sash through the container's handle, and trudged toward the house with it on her back. As she walked, water from the bucket wet her robe. She ignored it as usual.

Chos sgron noticed Lha mo's robe was wet but hesitated to ask her to change into another robe. Lha mo had refused to change her robe enough times for Chos sgron to conclude making this suggestion was useless. But, to her surprise, this time, Lha mo put on another robe without being reminded, then mounted a polled black yak and drove her family's hundred yaks to a nearby mountain.

Bkra shis sat on the right side of the house, near the stove, holding a cigarette between his index and middle fingers. His fingers were yellowed from frequently holding cigarette butts. Igniting a long, thin stick in the stove, he lit the cigarette and puffed.

Chos sgron, sitting next to Bkra shis, coughed. Bkra shis looked at her and laughed. After she lightly hit his shoulder, he inhaled deeply and blew the smoke over her face, making her cough again, lower her head, and wipe away tears.

Bkra shis again laughed.

Moving to the left side of the room, Chos sgron said, "I wonder why Lha mo has lately become so responsible. She gets up early, fetches water, and does family chores without being asked."

"She is mature and old enough to understand what her burden is. She should marry."

"She's only seventeen."

"My mother married when she was sixteen."

Chos sgron had married when she was seventeen, so she didn't know what to say.

Elsewhere, on top of the mountain, Lha mo and Pad kho sat watching as their families' yaks grazed below. Lha mo leaned her head against Pad kho's shoulder and gazed at mountain ranges far in the distance. Trees covered the middle parts of most mountains that were all topped by snowy peaks amid blue sky and rambling flocks of clouds. Lha mo rarely blinked. Maybe she was enjoying the beautiful scenery or contemplating.

A breeze blew a lock of her hair, blocking her view. She brushed it away and asked, "What is a good girl?"

Lha mo often asked Pad kho such questions. This time, he had to think for a while. He recalled a time he had gone to town and walked near the local government compound. Noticing a crowd in a courtyard, he had joined them. The local leader, clad in a black suit and wearing dark sunglasses, was surrounded by people. Lha mo 'tsho, a tall woman with high cheekbones, had just been designated the third greatest woman in the community, an honor that was given just once in a decade. The leader told Lha mo 'tsho to stand next to him while he handed her a large certificate. She dared not look at the onlookers, and her face reddened when they applauded. Finally, the leader pointed to a black mare tied to a stake nearby and said to Lha mo 'tsho, "It's yours!"

Everyone clapped again.

Pad kho answered, "A girl who listens to her parents, like Lha mo 'tsho, is a good girl. She earned the greatest woman award in our community."

In the early evening, Pad kho's father, Pad ma, visited Bkra shis. Pad ma wore a Tibetan robe, high-heeled leather boots that almost reached his knees, and a bike helmet. Bkra shis and Chos sgron warmly greeted him as he got off his motorcycle. Once they came inside the one-room house, he sat on the floor crossed-legged on the right side of the room, next to Bkra shis.

Chos sgron offered Pad ma a bowl of milk tea, which he sipped while chatting with Bkra shis. Meanwhile, Chos sgron mixed dough in a basin, cut a chunk of meat into small pieces on a cutting board, and made dumplings, all the while listening to Bkra shis and Padma's conversation.

As the sun descended behind a spectacular, high mountain, Pad ma took out a strip of white silk presented to show respect and black cloth folded in four layers from his robe pouch. He offered them respectfully to Bkra shis, who accepted them, signifying that he accepted Pad kho's proposal to marry Lha mo. Pad ma then stood and said he was ready to leave. Bkra shis urged him to stay the night, but he declined.

Bkra shis and Chos sgron escorted Pad ma to his motorcycle, which he mounted, started, and roared into the distance, heading home.

As Chos sgron and Lha mo were tying their family's yaks in the yak enclosure, Chos sgron said, "Your father accepted Pad ma's proposal that you and Pad kho marry."

Lha mo was happy to hear the name, Pad kho, and ignored the rest of what her mother said. She concentrated on restraining a wild calf.

That night, Lha mo ate two dumplings and felt full. Usually, she ate ten to fifteen. Her favorite food was dumplings.

As usual, she turned on the radio and listened to the local broadcast. A man spoke in a pleasing, clear voice, "Lha mo 'tsho was recognized as the greatest woman in our Thang dkar Community. She never attended school, herded yaks from the age of six, never disobeyed her parents, and agreed to whatever decision her parents made. Her parents and neighbors considered her to be extremely filial. Her parents arranged her marriage, as did other parents for their children in the community. Her female friends knew that she was eager to marry her lover, but she obeyed her parents."

Having heard the same account countless times, Lha mo turned down the radio and stared at the ceiling.

Later that night, Lha mo rolled over in bed and imagined her marriage. She heard her father snoring and her family's watchdog barking in the distance.

The next day, Lha mo herded her family's yaks on the mountain, where her lover, Pad kho, often herded his family's yaks. But this day, Pad kho did not come. Lha mo missed him and was upset, but then imagined they would eventually marry and live the rest of their lives happily together.

In the evening, when Lha mo entered her family's house after finishing tying the yaks, she was surprised to see Pad kho sitting with her father on the right side of the room. Pad ma had no idea why Pad kho had come to her home.

Later, when she went out to pee with her mother, she learned that Pad kho was her fiancé. Lha mo couldn't believe her ears and asked, "What did you say? He's going to marry me?"

Her mother answered, "Yes. Both sets of parents have agreed."

"You told me Pad ma's son, Pad kho, would marry me yesterday."

"Yesterday, I just said you would marry Pad kho. You didn't let me finish. You ran after a calf. Anyway, Pad ma's nephew will marry you, not Pad ma's son."

Lha mo silently sighed.

The next day, Lha mo and Pad ma's son, Pad kho, sat where they usually rested. Lha mo put her head against Pad kho's chest, listening to his heart beating as he watched a slow-moving herd of clouds.

Once Lha mo informed him about her marriage, they said nothing for some minutes. Then Lha mo closed her eyes and asked, "What is a good wife?"

Pad kho pondered for some time, not responding immediately as he usually did. He then sadly said, "A good wife is loyal to her husband and never betrays him"

When it was time to drive the yaks home, Pad kho stared at Lha mo's triple-lidded eyes, high straight nose, and rosy cheeks. He wanted to embrace her, but he restrained himself, thinking, "She's already engaged to my cousin. It's immoral if I hug her. She will think I am a bad man."

He stood, mounted his riding yak, and rode away.

Lha mo stood and walked to where her riding yak was tied. Her tall, slim body caught Pad kho's final attention. He thought, "She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. Why can't we love each other? Why will she marry my cousin and not me? Should we run away to another tribe? No! What terrible ideas! I will not destroy the relationship between our families."

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Nine years later, Lha mo's seven-year-old son, Zla ba, was a primary school grade two student. Though he didn't do well in school, most students admired him because he had a great mother. Locals believed she would earn the honor of being recognized as the greatest woman in their community the following year, something that happened only once in a decade. The chosen woman was a model for all women to follow.

Lha mo and her husband, Pad kho, slept in a new adobe house that adjoined her family's old house.

One night, Pad kho went to sleep early. At nine PM every night, Lha mo turned on the radio and listened to the local broadcast for thirty minutes. Again, the night's broadcast described how Lha mo 'tsho became the third greatest woman in Thang dkar Community, a story that was often broadcast.

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Pad kho's maternal uncle, 'Phags pa, was surrounded by local men at a meeting. "We should choose three candidates for the next great woman. In two months, the local government will send some people here and select one as the greatest woman."

Local men discussed this in small groups. Most chose Lha mo as a candidate, but the leader disagreed. He argued, "Once I heard Lha mo secretly met her lover, Pad ma's son, Pad kho, on the day after she was engaged, so she's ineligible to be a candidate."

Bkra shis disputed, "They herded yaks on the same mountain that day. She didn't plan for that to happen. Don't lie! Your daughter, Lha 'dzoms, doesn't qualify. She's not sincere. I heard she has several lovers."

It was the first time someone had opposed 'Phags pa. His face flushed as he stood up, stomped toward Bkra shis while fumbling in his robe pouch. Others knew they would fight and restrained 'Phags pa. The two men then angrily shouted at each other.

Locals all agreed to choose Bkra lha and 'Dzoms pe as candidates but disagreed for hours over whether to choose Lha 'dzoms or Lha mo as the third candidate, eventually deciding on Lha mo.

The next day, late in the evening as it was snowing, Bkra shis' family's watchdog began barking furiously. Bkra shis went out as a horse rider neared his family's yak enclosure. When the rider waved, Bkra shis walked over to 'Phags pa.

After a half-hour, Chos sgron, with great concern, saw someone lying near the entrance of the yak enclosure. She rushed over. Blood was flowing from Bkra shis' head, his face was pale, and he could not speak. Chos sgron wept while using her apron to staunch the bleeding. Sitting on the muddy ground, she held Bkra shis' bloody head in her lap and gazed into her husband's eyes as his life drained away.

A few days later, Chos sgron persuaded Lha mo, "Divorce Pad kho. Treat him as our enemy. His maternal uncle killed your father."

Lha mo knew Pad kho loved her and would provide life-long companionship. He had spent most of their nine years of marriage with her at home. He had participated in local horse races only three times, and had been only twice to the local township town to pick up their son from the primary school, and had taken their son to the local school only three times. Locals called him "grandpa"

because he spent most of his time at home like an old man. He never beat her and bought shirts and scarves for her each time he went to town.

Lha mo protested, "He didn't kill my father, and he's my son's father. Why should I treat him as my enemy?"

Chos sgron, squinting at Lha mo, demanded, "Listen! Divorce Pad kho. If you don't, it's a big shame for our family. If you don't listen and quarrel with me, locals will think you are not filial. You will not become the next greatest woman."

Announcing that she didn't want to be a great woman, Lha mo picked up her radio, smashed it on the floor, and shouted, "I don't want to be who you want me to be!"

The next day, Lha mo asked her cousin, Ngag dbang, to take her to the township town. As they got on Ngag dbang's motorcycle, he turned and cautioned Lha mo before he started the engine, "Don't be angry with your mother. Obey her. Don't entertain silly ideas. Stay with her. Your home is where your mother lives."

After a few seconds, Lha mo lied, "I'm not going to leave my family. I only want to visit my son."

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Sitting on a patch of grass in front of the school's dining room Zla ba held a small metal bowl of rice and chunks of potatoes and beef. He started to eat, but when he saw his mother walking towards him, he ran to her, leaving a trail of potatoes, rice, and meat.

Lha mo went with Zla ba to his Tibetan teacher, Thub bstan, and asked for permission to take Zla ba to lunch in a nearby restaurant. "We'll return as soon as possible," she assured.

After that, no one knew Lha mo and Zla ba's whereabouts.

Pad kho married a woman from another tribe and eventually moved to her home. Locals said his wife and his mother were locked in endless quarrels.

Some years later, Lha mo and Zla ba returned to their tribe with a tall, bearded, bald man - Lhamo's husband. Lha mo was unable to pronounce his name, so she called him Thar ba.

Thar ba was kind to Lha mo and treated Zla ba as his own son. Locals couldn't understand Thar ba's language. Sometimes, Lha mo and Thar ba had challenges communicating, but both felt loved when they were together. Each time Thar ba went to town, he bought things for Zla ba that he thought he would enjoy. Zla ba was happy and loved Thar ba.

They established a new family in Thang dkar Community.

TIBETAN TERMS

'dzoms pe འཛོམས་པེ།
'phags pa འཕགས་པ།
bkra lha བཀྲ་ལྷ།
bkra shis བཀྲ་ཤིས།
chos sgron ཆོས་སྒྲོན།
lha 'dzoms ལྷ་འཛོམས།
lha mo ལྷ་མོ།
lha mo 'tsho ལྷ་མོ་འཚོ།
ngag dbang དགག་དབང་།
pad kho པད་ཁོ།
pad ma པད་མ།
thang dkar ཐང་དཀར།
thar ba ཐར་བ།
thub bstan ཐུབ་བསྟན།
zla ba ཟླ་བ།